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CIA intrigue suggested in nuke worker's death

By ED LION

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NEW YORK -- Investigators uncovered evidence suggesting nuclear plant worker Karen Silkwood may have stumbled onto a plutonium smuggling plot and her mysterious death may have been the subject of a cover-up by the CIA, the FBI and Iranian agents, a new book reports.

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In a book published this month, author Richard Rashke wrote that a private investigator was told by a source that the FBI had a secret report

saying Mrs. Silkwood was 'run off' the road the night she was killed in a 1974 auto wreck.

Mrs. Silkwood, 28, a divorced mother of three, was on her way to meet a New York Times reporter to discuss safety violations at the Kerr-McGee Nuclear Corp.'s plutonium processing plant in Crescent, Okla., when her car hit a concrete highway wingwall and she was killed.

The FBI and local authorities officially ruled her death in November 1974 an accident.

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But in 'The Killing of Karen Silkwood,' Rashke contends investigators for Mrs. Silkwood's family and a congressional subcommittee that held inconclusive hearings on the case repeatedly were rebuffed when seeking FBI documents on the affair.

Rashke, an investigative reporter for National Catholic Reporter, offers no conclusions about her death, but his details of the murky trail of intrigue

followed by the investigators raises many questions and deepens the mystery surrounding her death.

Rashke wrote that Mrs. Silkwood, a lab technician who was active in plant union activities, had been collecting data that she said showed the plant was plagued by safety violations and also was manufacturing defective nuclear fuel rods.

In addition, she told a friend 'she had found out that 40 pounds of plutonium, enough to make almost three atomic bombs, were missing from the plant,' Rashke wrote.

He said some investigators 'would later speculate there was a plutonium smuggling ring' at the plant.

The book, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, also says an investigator was told by a confidential source that the CIA had been involved in plutonium diversions from plants in the U.S.

Shortly before her death, Silkwood was mysteriously exposed to plutonium -- traces of which were found in her apartment. The now-defunct Atomic Energy Commission ruled that her contamination was deliberate and came from plutonium processed at the Kerr-McGee plant. But officials never resolved who was behind the contamination.

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Between 1976 and 1978, a private investigator and lawyers for her family began probing suspicions that she also may have been bugged before her death.

Investigator William Taylor traveled to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to check if a school specializing in teaching electronic surveillance, the National Intelligence Academy, had links to the Silkwood case, Rashke wrote.

Two White House officials heard about the investigation and Taylor was told the academy trained 'students' from Brazil, Uruguay and Iran's Savak and that it 'was a top-secret operation with CIA connections,' Rashke said.

One White House source warned an associate of Taylor that he should 'stand down' from the case, Rashke wrote.

'They'll kill him,' Raske quoted the source as saying. 'And I promise you no one will do anything about it.' He did not say who 'they' were.

Another source told Taylor 'the CIA had been diverting plutonium from nuclear plants and giving it to foreign countries friendly to the United States' and that several CIA operatives had died after being contaminated, Rashke wrote. But the source did not know if the Kerr-McGee plant was involved, Rashke said.

The book also said that on one trip to Florida, Taylor was attacked by two men, one wielding a knife, in his darkened motel room and one of the attackers was stabbed in the struggle before they fled. During the struggle the attackers spoke in a foreign tongue, later identified as the language used in Iran.

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In October 1977, a confidential source told Taylor that the FBI had secret reports of surveillance on Mrs. Silkwood before her death and they were transmitted under a code from the National Security Agency -- the supersecret electronic spy agency of the U.S. government.

The source later said a secret FBI report indicated Silkwood was 'run off the road' the night of her fatal wreck and the FBI knew who was behind the action, Rashke wrote.

Silkwood's family sued Kerr-McGee and in May 1979 won a \$10.5 million award on grounds the plant was negligent because she was contaminated by plutonium from the facility. But a judge dismissed a suit charging an FBI

agent and Kerr-McGee were involved in a conspiracy to wiretap and harrass her.

No criminal charges were ever filed in the case.

[^](#) **BACK TO TOP**

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